

What Did This Church Lack?

By E. B. CHAPMAN

TWO ecclesiastics were one day admiring a magnificent church property. Said one, "The church can no longer say, 'Silver and gold have I none.' " "No," replied the other, "But neither can she say, 'Rise up and walk.' " The Book of the Revelation has this address to the Laodicean church, which many commentators believe to be a prophetic description of the materialistic religion of this age: "Thou sayest, I am rich and increased with goods and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked.... Anoint thine eyes with eyesalve that thou mayest see."

THERE is a new pastor at the Independence Boulevard Christian Church at Kansas City, Missouri. The church probably is the wealthiest of the city. Dr. George Hamilton Combs, the pastor for 27 years, has just retired. He will ally himself with the Interchurch Movement as contributing editor of the Christian Evangelist because, on his return from France where he preached to doughboys as near the front line trenches as he was permitted to go,

he found a lack of interest in religion in his Kansas City church. He resigned, he said, because a pledge of renewed consecration by his congregation had not been kept.

When he returned to his pulpit after months in the proximity of the firing line, he found a religious decadence, which, he said, made it impossible for him to continue as pastor.

An expectant audience filled the church when Doctor Combs returned from Europe. But instead of hearing a sermon filled with interesting sidelights on the war, the church members were astounded when the minister read his resignation. Then he told of the lack of religious interest and effort and announced his resignation was to be accepted unless members of the church would pledge themselves to co-operate more closely with him, to devote more of their time and energy to Christianity.

Doctor Combs told his audience the members must drive out the worldliness that had crept into the church if he was to continue as pastor. He gave his congregation until the following Sunday to consider the proposal.

The next Sunday the church was jammed. The pastor was given the pledge he sought and the ministry seemed likely to continue indefinitely. A few months later the audience again was astounded when Doctor Combs told it the pledge had not been kept, that the interest which had flared up when he demanded it had died down and that his resignation, which he would not reconsider, was in the hands of the trustees. It just has become effective.

The Independence Boulevard Christian Church, known to Kansas Cityans as "R. A. Long's Church," has been known nationally for years. It furnished the theme for writers for magazines who held it up as a model. The ambitious program of that church probably has not been excelled and seldom equalled. From the beginning, 27 years ago, when he preached to a small congregation in a rented hall on the second floor, Doctor Combs built up first his congregation, then he built a palace of worship. Among the first wealthy men he interested was Mr. Long. Mr. Long believed the power of the frail man who has been described as "a human orchid" would result in a vast amount of good if he were placed where more persons might hear him. The minister pointed out to Mr. Long that a great service might be accomplished by a man of millions who would put energy and money into Christianity as he put them into business.

AND so Doctor Combs saw his place of worship grow from a rented hall on a side street to a large church—a real palace—of seventy rooms on a boulevard on which a city passed twice daily. The structure cost \$300,000 of which Mr. Long gave all but \$70,000. One thousand persons can sit down to dinner in the banquet room. There are four pipe organs. The largest was rated as the finest in the country when it was installed.

There is a prayer meeting room which seats 1,700 and which is said to be the most luxuriously furnished room in Kansas City. Soft rugs, mahogany furniture, draperies which might well grace the apartments of a prince, and a pipe organ costing more than some city churches, are included.

In one wing is what was, when the structure was built, an innovation in a house of worship. On one floor are basket ball and handball courts where boys played and overweight business men forgot their cares and sought to renew their youth. On another, cinder tracks lured those whose athletic turn had more to do

with fleetness of foot. A third floor contained the largest indoor swimming pool in the city where daughters of the church, as well as its sons, splashed about.

The opening of the church brought a wave of religious enthusiasm which swept the city with irresistible force. Doctor Combs, who had preached to few in a rented hall, preached to thousands.

Hundreds who sought to attend the services were unable to gain admission to the great auditorium in which this man of fire, who charmed men and loved them, had his pulpit. His early dreams of a life of pastorship which would build a great church, throbbing with life, awake to every need of the community, of service to humanity, every day in the week, lifting up the unfortunate and making good the fortunate, had been realized.

The president of one of the biggest banks in town arose Sunday mornings before dawn to lead in a men's sunrise prayer meeting.

The children of the entire northeast section, then including the fashionable district of Kansas City and some poor ones, were listed in a card index system that contained, probably, more family history than any outside the big life insurance company offices. Every home was visited, homes where poverty as well as riches ruled. Reports were filled out showing what Sunday school the children attended. If they were non-attendants, a system of follow-up visits that took them to the big church on the boulevard was placed in operation.

Paid workers went about the neighborhood doing good. Nurses visited mothers and made suggestions to better the health of the families. Girls were taken into clubs and boys were made members of "Boyville," a youthful municipality where youngsters were taught the lessons of self-government in a "city" modeled after the latest form of civic rule. The rich and the poor jostled each other not only in the juvenile organiza-

preaching to great crowds. The minister's son, Pryor Combs, married Loula Long, daughter of

the wealthy godfather of the church. Then Mr. Long traded a residence costing \$20,000 to the minister for a modest house, valued, real estate men say, at \$6,500 in cash.

Doctor Combs became interested in farming. For a time he was a gentleman farmer, purchasing 40 acres near Kansas City which he stocked with dairy cattle. But the venture failed and Doctor Combs lost money.

Church attendance began to diminish slightly, almost imperceptible at first, but noticeable as it increased. Doctor Combs seemed to be preaching with all his old fire and lofty idealism but there began to be more petty bickerings among the members. Apparently each of these was settled but each series seemed to leave a mark, almost imperceptible, but still a mark.

Then came a sensation that rocked the social life of the town as well as the church. The wife of the organist of the church shot and killed her husband. She admitted the shooting.

Explaining her crime, she said that preceding the murder she had hidden in an organ in one of the rooms of the church used by her husband, the organist, as a studio. What she saw there threw her into a jealous rage.

The organist was popular. In fact members of the Independence Boulevard Church were delighted when it was announced the church procured him as organist. As a musician he was known outside the city. And it seems the church never has recovered from the shooting.

LACK of church interest, barely noticeable before, was plain enough following the murder. One faction sympathized with the wife; another favored the slain musician. Scandal furnished the topic of conversation both inside the church and out.

The pastor continued his sermons, pointing the way to progress with all his vigor, but his congregation was not interested as of old. The craving for sensa-

tion, aroused by the murder, was not satisfied with religious teaching.

Then came the war. Both Doctor Combs's sons entered the service and the minister wished to go. His congregation, always quick to grant any request the pastor made, consented.

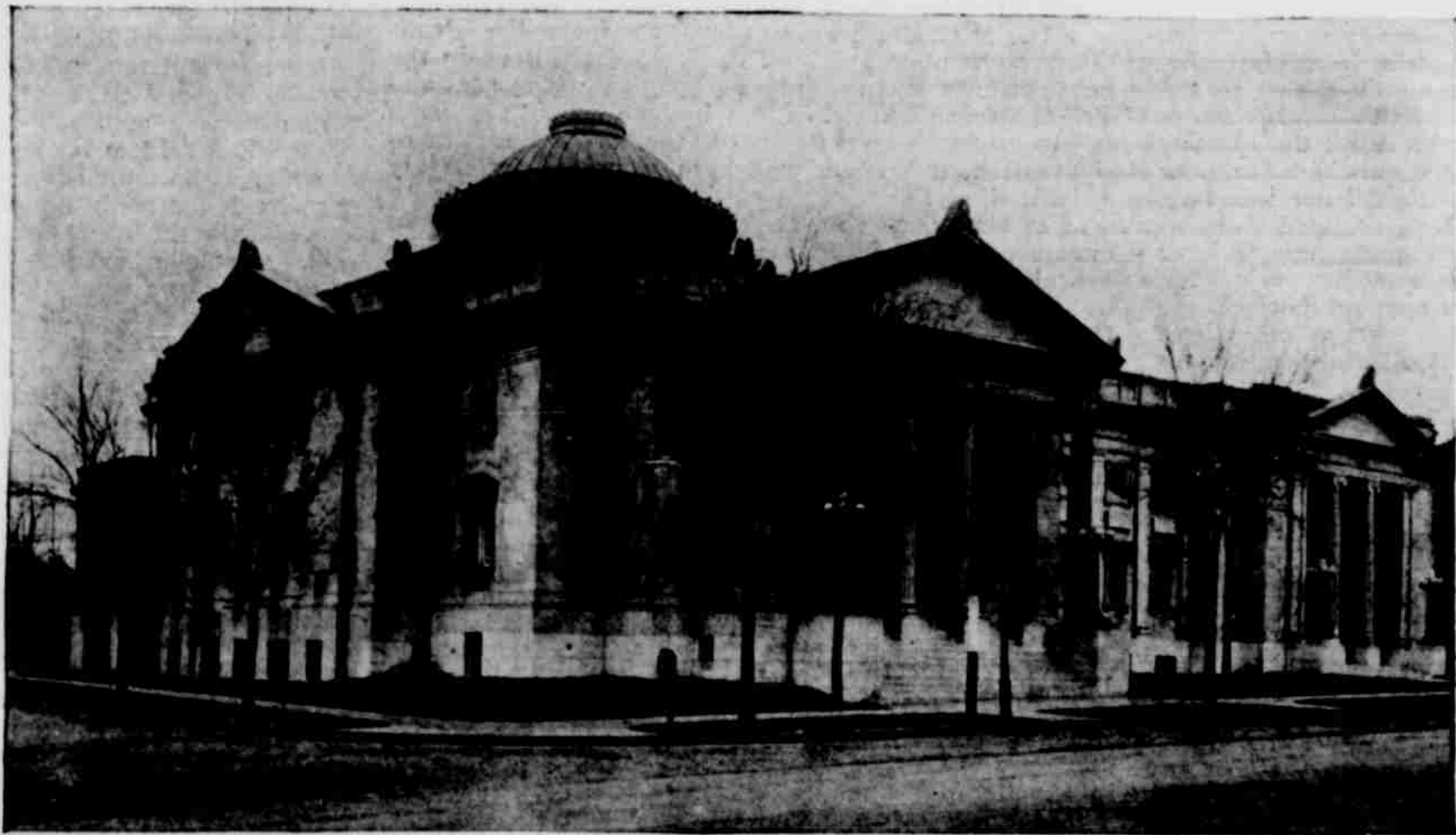
Then came months of service to the music of the guns instead of pipe organs. His edifice of worship became a Y. M. C. A. hut; his audience no longer rolled up in limousines but tramped through the sticky mud of Flanders. There was no rustling of silks, no odors of costly perfumes, no preening of fine garments, no lifting of lorgnettes to the eyes. The nearest to chimes they heard was the gas alarm beaten on a "triangle." Men were tired, their clothing soiled and torn and odors that floated into the places where the services were held were anything but pleasant.

The men listened to the pastor and his helpers be-

cause the message was one to appeal to men. There was no sitting in a cushioned pew, gazing about while the week's profits were recounted mentally.

The doughboys took the measure of Doctor Combs and liked him. They appraised him as a real man, a standing they did not give all Y. M. C. A. workers who sought to interest the soldiers in religion. And, perhaps without knowing it, Doctor Combs took appraisal of the men who made up his congregations and decided they were real men with a real interest in a real religion. Perhaps his sermons to them recalled to him the days when he preached in a rented hall when there was less of the smugness and self-satisfaction of his wealthy audience of later days.

The war ended but Doctor Combs was so thrilled with his work in France he continued it until duty directed him to return to Kansas City and awaken his congregation to the standards of Christian service he believed were demanded as a result of the war. Returning early last summer from the filth and wretchedness of France he noted in sharp contrast the display of wealth, the greed of commercial strife, the struggle for power, position and patronage. He saw men he knew were interested mostly in things entirely foreign to what had appealed to the war-cleansed congregations he preached to in France. He sought to awaken in his wealthy associates a realization that the soldiers, coming back from the shadow of the valley, would not be satisfied with the old order. The membership of the church, after a brief response to Doctor Combs's plea, failed to rise to the opportunity and responsibility the pastor had set for it and the final resignation resulted.



Independence Boulevard Christian Church, Kansas City.



DR. GEORGE HAMILTON COMBS

The town had a good laugh at the row that followed but the matter was settled and again the career of the church was fairly smooth. Decay may even then have been present, but difficult to discern. Thousands attended the Sunday school and there were more than 3,000 names on the church rolls. Doctor Combs was

tion but at the church doors and inside the mansion devoted to worship. Such was the church in the heyday of its popularity and power. THEN—

The first hint of worldliness came in a way that shocked the community. A man whose porch was not far from the church complained of what he declared the immodesty shown by the church in not placing curtains on the windows of the swimming pool in which young women disported themselves. Girl bathers, he said, easily were visible to passers-by through the windows. He wrote a letter to the press stating these facts.